

Nature VS Nurture

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Summary: Animal Rescue AU: Valka's a veterinarian and owns a shelter that she upkeeps with her husband and teenage son, tending to sick and injured animals and removing them from dangerous environments as well. Jack takes his sister Emma to the shelter to get her a pet for her birthday. And, due to a few unexpected events, he meets a reason to go to the shelter a lot more often.

## 1. Intent VS Outcome

**\*\*Hi everyone! This is a little something that I wrote and posted on Tumblr a while back and, because I'm having writer's block at the moment with my ongoing fics, I decided to expand upon this stupid thing instead... so now this is gonna be another fic I'll continue at some point in the future... hopefully soon. Ugh, writer's block sucks.\*\***

**\*\*Anyway, I hope you like what I have here. I think it's cute and I just \_really\_ \_wanted\_ an AU where Valka's a vet because it fits her so well to me. So I wrote one... I hope it's enjoyable for more people than just me. \*\***

**\* \* \***

><p>Emma had been talking about wanting to have a pet of her own for a good year now. Ever since her new friend Jamie moved in down the street and showed off the greyhound that was his family's pet, Emma had been begging and begging for a furry friend of her own so that Jamie's dog Abby would have someone to play with while the two fourth graders did the same.<p>

All the while, Jack Overland and his parents had all been holding firm about not wanting to rush out and get another mouth to feed and body to keep watch of. First of all, it was because their father was allergic to dogs, so having one of those was immediately out of the question. And, while their mother wasn't exactly against her daughter

having a pet, she wanted to see if this desire would fade away in a few weeks or even months, since lots of kids move on to something else very easily. And Jack&#160;| he loved his sister and all, but he wanted to ride it out too. Come on, she went through a phase where she was convinced that cooties were a real thing (which Jack may or may not have been involved in) so she avoided everyone for fear of spreading them. It only lasted for three days, but it happened.

Turned out that Emma's longing for a pet wasn't going away as the months went on, so the heads of the Overland house decided that it would be a nice birthday gift for their daughter. They wanted it to be a surprise, but they would both be working through most of Emma's birthday that July. So, they soon recruited their teenage son to assist in \_Operation Birthday Pet\_, \_as Jack had dubbed it. They told him to take his little sister to an animal rescue place in town that was supposed to be great. It doubled as a veterinary hospital and it took in anything from parrots to zoo lions for check-ups and procedures. It had good reviews online so it couldn't be that bad, right?

That's how Jack wound up in front of the \_Dr. Haddock Animal Hospital and Shelter\_ with his giddy sister pulling his arm to get him to the front door faster, once he told her why they were standing in front of the place to begin with. Emma kept giggling and squeaking as she spoke and goaded Jack on to "get a move on already." But it seemed as though his legs couldn't carry him as fast as Emma wanted them to, so she eventually just let go and ran to the door, hopping on the balls of her feet impatiently while her brother jogged the rest of the way over.

"Come on, Jack!" She pleaded as he walked up the front steps to the door "Come on!"

"I'm coming." He smirked as he purposefully slowed down to see her reaction to his dawdling.

Emma just groaned in response and threw her head back "You're so slow." She complained.

"I am not slow." He playfully retorted "You're just too fast." The siblings stuck their tongues out at each other before deciding to be somewhat normal when they stepped inside. But, then again, when you dye your hair as white as snow, you tend to get looks wherever you go.

They walked inside the building after composing themselves and found a rather large man sitting at the front desk, his eyes partially covered by his thick eyebrows as he stared at the computer screen in front of him with a bored expression. He was well built and had an unkempt red beard and a head of hair to match it. As the teen and his sister approached the desk, he noticed a name tag near the desktop that read "Stefan Haddock." Maybe he was the owner? The man seemed to be unaware of their presence until Jack cleared his throat, to which his sharp green eyes darted in his direction. The boredom in his face disappeared, but he still looked quite intimidating "Can I help you?" Wow, his voice was deep.

"Uh," Jack gulped "yeah. Uh, it's my sister's birthday today and I brought her here to see about getting her a pet?"

The man with the stoic expression stood from his chair and peeked over the desk so that he could see Emma at his side, holding onto her brother's arm and cowering slightly at the stranger. Upon seeing her hiding, the man's face immediately softened and a smile grew underneath his mustache and beard "Happy Birthday, Sweetheart." He said to her with a calm, even tone. Emma smiled back at him and came out from behind Jack, still holding onto his arm "How old are you today?"

"I'm nin- no, ten now." She corrected herself, not really used to being the big double digits yet.

"Good for you, lass." Stefan praised "What kind of animal are you looking for today?"

Emma started bouncing again "I \_really\_ want a bunny." Jack held onto her shoulders to get her to stop fidgeting so much and she complied.

"You're in luck, then. We just got some new rabbits in this morning." The clerk went to go in the back room, but abruptly stopped and turned to his customers once more "Give me a moment, I have to go make sure my wife's not still giving them check-ups."

The siblings waited for him to come back through the doors, which he did a few minutes later with a woman with long brown hair pulled back in a ponytail and wearing a rubber apron over what looked like the scrubs doctors wear in the hospital. She took off a pair of rubber gloves as she walked and smiled at the two of them when she leaned on the counter "Hello there." She greeted "I'm Val, welcome to the shelter. My husband tells me you're lookin' to give a little bunny rabbit a new home?"

"Yeah, we-"

"Oh, great!" She cheered, cutting Jack off "I've got about six in the back, if you two want to-"

There was a clang of some sort coming from the back room, like a cage door slamming shut, followed by a panicked shout "Mo-mom! Mom, it's happening!"

Val's green eyes widened and she quickly turned towards the door. She looked back to Jack and Emma, but her eyes shifted to the doorway yet again and she tried to wipe the concern off of her face by chuckling "I'm sorry; I'd better see what the fuss is about." She speed-walked back through the double doors and Jack watched as her form vanished farther into the background with each sway of the doors. He could hear two people talking back there, one of the voices being Val's and the other being the person who called out to her before. Amongst it, a pain-filled yowl sounded once in a while, but it was mostly drowned out by the two people frantically chattering.

Stefan looked between the doors and the siblings before giving an apologetic expression and poking his head through the doorway to see what was going on. Then, he re-approached them and mumbled "I figured it was herâ€¦" His attention turned back to Jack and Emma and he sighed "Someone dumped a cat in a box in front of the shelter the other day. We could tell she was pregnant and it was only a matter of

time before she popped. Guess her day came."

"Who would do that?" Emma wondered.

"We ask ourselves that a lot here, lass." Stefan huffed and rubbed his forehead "At least she doesn't have to deliver them on the streets. That's what matters." Then, he shook his head and moved on "I could take you both back there myself to see the rabbits, since Val's tied up now."

Jack nodded and took his sister's hand as Stefan led them through the double doors and down a hallway, until they reached a door with the silhouette of a rabbit on the front of it "This is where we keep all of our smaller animals. Rabbits, guinea pigs, other small rodents." He commented as he opened the door. Emma let go of Jack's hand and wandered farther inside the room "Just be calm. The critters are skittish, especially the rabbits." Stefan looked out into the hall again "I'd better go see if they need any help with that mother cat. Feel free to look while I'm gone."

Once Stefan left, Jack began to scan the cages that lines the walls and stacked up to columns of three. Inside each cage was some kind of animal, from guinea pigs and hamsters to a skunk and even a squirrel. Though, the more wild animals in the room all appeared to be injured somehow, so Jack assumed that they were only here to recover and not for adoption. Jack then turned his attention back to Emma, who was standing on her tip-toes to see into a cage on the top shelf of the stack against the far wall "Want a lift, squirt?"

"I can see, Jack." She remarked. Her brother just rolled his eyes and squatted down, wrapping his arms around her midsection before lifting her higher so that she could have a better view of what was inside: a set of three small rabbits "Thanks."

"Sure." The older sibling grunted, doing his best not to drop his sister who was beginning to get too heavy to carry "See one you like?"

"I like the gray one." She pointed to a dark gray rabbit with spots that almost looked black "But I like the orange one too" her finger moved over to the rabbit with orange fur that faded to white on its nose, belly, and paws "Which one do you like, Jack?"

"Come on, we're getting this thing for you, remember? It doesn't matter what I think."

"It'll help me choose though." She whined.

"There's still more of them in the cage next to this one, ya know."

The younger Overland hung her head "You're not making this easier."

Jack chuckled as he put her back on the ground "I'm your older brother; I'm not supposed to make things easier for you." He commented before ruffling her hair a bit.

Emma swatted at his hand before starting to fix her brown locks "Jerk."

Stefan came back into the room after Jack let out a snort from trying to hold back more laughter "Enjoying yourselves, I see."

"A little." Jack smirked before becoming a bit more serious "What's going on with your cat situation?"

"Nothing good." He muttered "The mother was malnourished when we got her and she still isn't at a good weight for her condition. Val's not sure if she or any of the kittens'll make it."

Jack shifted his weight from one foot to the other "Well that sucks."

"I know." Stefan agreed "Val and Hayden hate it when the odds are like this."

"Who's Hayden?" Emma asked.

"My son." The red-head explained "He's looking to follow his mother into being a vet. He helps around here as much as he can. It's certainly a more exciting job than doing my kind of work. He's about your age, actually."

Jack nodded and saw Emma on her tip-toes again trying to see into the cages. This time, Stefan joined him in a chuckle "You want another lift?"

"Please?" She implored. Her brother just shook his head and picked her up again "Thanks, Jack."

"Sure."

Jack and Emma spent over an hour in the shelter before Emma had finally chosen which bunny she wanted (she wound up picking the black and gray one that she pointed out earlier) and Stefan had gotten together a starter set for her, including a cage, bedding, food, toys, and other things. When the price rang up, Jack swiped the credit card that their parents had given him to spend on Emma's present. The little rabbit was placed in a cardboard box with a handle and air holes towards the top while everything else was packed into a large plastic bag.

Stefan was telling Emma some extra things that she should know about taking care of her new pet when Val slinked through the doorway again, some blood smudged on her apron and a sad look on her face. She just waited quietly near the doors until her husband became aware of her presence and he spoke to her "What is it, my dear? What happened?" She just shook her head before going back to whatever she was doing. Stefan went after her "Val? Val?!"

Jack and Emma shared a look before putting the bunny and starter kit on the counter and following the couple, partially out of nosiness and partially out of concern. What happened? Did something go wrong? Was Val hurt?

They turned a corner and peeked into a room that was set up like one at the doctor's office. On one of the side walls, a counter was littered with animal-related pamphlets, tools, and needles. A table sat in the middle of the room and there were a few chairs leaning on

the other wall. Everything about it would have been normal, if it hadn't been for what else was inside.

On the table, there was a lump hidden under a cloth that was stained red. Jack could only assume that was the mother cat under there. Val was resting on her elbows beside it, shaking her head and looking forlorn. Stefan had her pulled her into a one-armed hug as he loomed over her like some kind of protective shield. She was muttering something to him and he kept replying "I know, I know" as he whispered in her ear.

"I know we did everything we could, that we couldn't help her anymoreâ€|" She said a little louder "but it still hurts every time it happens."

"I know, my dear. But feeling this way each time it does just shows how much you care."

Val nodded at her husband's words and cracked a small smile "Thank you, Stefan." The large man just nodded and held her.

"It wasn't for nothing, though." Val and Stefan looked up and Jack spun around to see a boy behind him holding something wrapped in a towel. He had messy brown hair and green eyes that were as bright as the vet and her husband's. A crooked smile showed matching teeth and he had freckles splattered all over him, even on the hands that were cradling whatever was in that towel andâ€| a bottle?

Val left Stefan's hold and rushed over to him "Is he still alive?"

"Yeah," The boy responded as she anxiously peeked at the thing in his arms "I found the formula; I just made it a little too hot soâ€|"

The vet trailed the back of her hand over the small plastic bottle "I think it's fine. Feed him while I clean up, okay Hayden?"

The boy nodded as she went about cleaning up the space, angling the bottle at the little creature in his arms. He looked down at the bundle with a face that was kind of hard for Jack to describe. But the smile tugging at his thin lips was pure and gentle and his eyes seemed brighter just from looking down at it. It kind of reminded Jack of the way his mom looked at Emma after she was born: with pure happiness. Happiness that she was there and alive and healthy. Hayden had that same look on his face right then. And that look made Jack's heart skip a beatâ€| or maybe two.

In this daze, he didn't even notice the world around him for a moment. When he finally did, he detected the two strangers in the room with him and awkwardly blinked at them before grinning "Hi." Oh, God, this kid was too cute to be real! His eyes flicked down to the bundle in his arms before going back to Jack "You, uh, you wanna see?"

The taller boy nodded as the shorter moved some of the towel out of the way with his free hand, allowing Jack and Emma a clearer view of a tiny black kitten sucking on the end of the bottle and pawing at the air aimlessly "He's the only one in the litter that's still alive. He doesn't even have his mom to take care of himâ€|" Hayden

went on. He sounded like he felt for the kitten, but it would be kind of heartless to not feel for a story like that "I hope he makes it."

"If he survives until morning, I think he will." Val rubbed her son's back and smiled at him "And, if he does, I expect nothing less than you taking his mother's place, Hayden."

The freckled boy looked up to her almost in disbelief "Really? You'll let me?"

"I think you can handle it, don't you Stefan?"

"Definitely." He agreed "Besides. You'll have to learn somehow, son."

Hayden smiled so wide that it took up half of his face and he let out a few intermittent laughs "Thanks, Mom."

"Of course." She rubbed his shoulder before looking back down at the kitten "Such a wee thingâ€¦ so frail, so fragile." She cooed, gently running a lone finger through the kitten's fur.

"I know." Hayden agreed.

A giant hand clamped onto Jack's shoulder "Right, now you two are taken care of?" The siblings nodded "Alright then. If you have any more questions, you can always come back here and talk to one of us."

"Oh, or" Val rushed over to the counter and rummaged around until she found a business card and handed it to Emma "Just give us a call."

"Thank you." Emma piped.

"You're welcome." Val replied with a smile.

With that, Jack and Emma went to gather their things and head for home, but not before Jack snuck another glance at Hayden fawning over the little ball of fur. Yep, he'd be back here, whether they had questions about the rabbit or not.

## 2. Jack VS Willpower

**\*\*Hi~! \*\***

**\*\*Due to the amount of reviews and follows/favorites that I got after posting this story, I actually broke my writer's block and got my fic chapters going again. This one came the easiest for me so here you go. I'm happy you all liked the first chapter so much; it helped be out of an awkward patch in both my life and my writing so... yeah, here's chapter 2. \*\***

**\* \* \***

><p>A few days after he and Emma had brought home her new pet rabbit, Jack learned that just having the little fluffy thing hanging around her bedroom made his baby sister smile more often. She was overjoyed

with her new pet and, so far, she was doing everything herself. Though, it was mostly making sure it had plenty of food and water every day. But it was still something that showed that this was a birthday present that Emma had really wanted.<p>

But one other thing about that day at the shelter couldn't get out of his mindâ€| Hayden. Those eyes and those freckles and that smile were constantly flashing through Jack's mind, practically haunting him with how often they frequented his thoughts. He wanted to go back to the shelter and see the freckled cutie again. He wanted to actually have a conversation with the guy and get to know more about him. He wanted to hear his voice more and he wanted to know if the guy even swung in his ballpark, even though Jack already swung whatever way he wanted to. Because it'd be a whole lot easier if he found out Hayden wasn't interested, right?

The only problem was that Jack didn't want to haul himself over there and blatantly ask Stefan Haddock if his son was around. How weird could that possibly sound? Especially if Hayden would be into him, it'd be sending the message to his dad "Hey, I wanna flirt with your son on your time. Hope you don't mind, thanks." No, no, he needed to be more subtle about this. He had to get a feel for what he was getting involved in before he plunged in blindly. Jack needed a plan or a reason to go there. And he just had to hope and pray that whatever excuse he would use would keep him there long enough for Hayden to wander into the main area and he could start working his magic on the brunet.

Val did say that he was welcome to come back if he or Emma had anything to ask about the rabbitâ€| so he wandered into his sister's room with that brilliant idea and asked her if she had anything she wanted to ask.

Her immediate reply was "Do you think it's okay if I take him out of his cage and let him run around? Or would that be dangerous?"

Jack pondered the question as he gazed at the small gray bunny drinking from its water bottle "I don't knowâ€| I'm only wondering if we can't find him and then he gets stepped on."

"Me too." Emma confirmed "I don't want him to get hurtâ€| wait, didn't they say something about letting him out?"

"Yeah, but I can't remember what it wasâ€|" And there was Jack's golden opportunity "You know, I can run down there and ask if you want me to."

Emma beamed a smile "Really?"

"Yeah, it's not that far." Jack assured "You'll be okay for a few by yourself?" The girl nodded "Alright. If I'm not back in a half an hour, call me alright?" She nodded again "See ya, squirt." He turned and headed for the front door.

"Bye, Jack!" Emma hollered.

It was maybe a ten minute walk down to the shelter. It was certainly shorter without lugging Emma or a whole bunch of animal stuff with him either way. Jack saw the building and the sign and his heart beat sped up a little bit. This was his one chance to talk to Hayden



without it being totally awkward; he had better not screw this up.

When he entered, he was immediately noticed by Stefan this time. The man behind the desk immediately recognized him and warmly smiled at him "Hello again, Jack." He greeted "What brings you back here? How's that rabbit doing?"

"He's doing alright; Emma's doing her best taking care of him." He replied "But she actually had something to ask and we only live up the road so I figured I'd run down and get an answer."

"And what's she wondering about?"

"She and I both know you said something about letting the rabbit out of its cage last time we were here." Jack started "But we, uhâ€¦ we both forgot exactly what you said. Could you repeat it for me?" He smiled meekly at the much larger male.

Stefan smiled and nodded "Of course. Once Emma trains the rabbit, he doesn't even have to be in the cage anymore. Though, it might be better to keep him there when no one can watch him until you know what happens when he's loose. Some like their cages and others don't, that varies. I gave you a training book, right?"

"Yep; she's been reading it." Jack confirmed "I had to explain a few things in it to her, but she's getting it."

"Very good. I'm sure she's doing well." Stefan clicked something on his computer before looking back at Jack "Was there anything else you wanted to ask?"

"Uhâ€¦" He trailed off and looked around the space, noticing a few people in the waiting area with their pets for check-ups "yeah, since I'm hereâ€¦" He turned his attention back to Stefan "how's that kitten doing? The one your wife delivered a few days ago?"

The bearded man chuckled to himself, muttering something about "Toothless" under his breath "The little warrior's doing well. Val's confident he'll survive so long as he's well taken care of."

"Your son's doing that, right?"

"Yes, and he's doing great so far." Stefan praised "Ever since his mother let him raise the thing, he's been doing nothing but taking care of him. Poor boy's barely getting any sleep because of it, though." He sighed and rubbed a temple "He's as stubborn as his mother, I tell you."

"At least it's alive."

"True." Stefan agreed. Jack peeked around again and saw no sign of Hayden anywhere. He was interrupted by Stefan clearing his throat to regain his attention "Is there something else you need, Jack?"

Jack felt himself blushing and took a few steps back "N-noâ€¦ I was just thinking, sorry."

"Hmm." The clerk hummed "Have a good day then."

"Right, uh, you tooâ€¦" Then the teen found himself jogging back home, not wanting to seem like a creep or become a burden to Stefan. He failed at trying to see Hayden again, but at least he got Emma's answer.

As the days went on, Jack had been doing nothing but coming up with another good reason to go down to the shelter and see if he could find a chance to talk to the other boy again. One of his first thoughts was to ask if that one kitten had survived or not, but he quickly shut the idea down. What if the little guy didn't make it through that first night and Hayden was upset about it? What if that question would pull a string and make the brunet tear up and not want to talk to Jack after that? He needed something fool-proof, something that would just get them better acquainted.

Unfortunately, Jack was not the best at coming up with fool-proof plans because he was a bit of a fool himself. He asked Emma countless times every day if she had any questions about her rabbit, even stupid ones like why the inside of its ears were pink or how it got the black patches in its fur. It was safe to say that Jack learned a lot about rabbit genetics from a confused Val one day. And that was how Jack finally realized that he should change his strategy a bit. She and Stefan probably thought something was going on with Jack suddenly popping up so much at their place of business by now, he didn't want them to throw him out or anything like that. All he wanted was to see Hayden again, but it seemed that the kid rarely came out of the employees only areas of the building.

One would think that a decent idea would be to simply ask if he could speak to the freckled teen and be done with it, but Jack tended to do things the hard way without even meaning to. He was having fun with this chase to happen upon Hayden and he didn't want to give up the search and ruin the game he'd created for himself.

So he came up with a few other ideas that involved frequently passing the shelter when he went anywhere with Emma or hovering close by if it was possible. The siblings would take a ride on their bikes or walk to get an ice cream and Jack would always direct his sister down routes that passed by the shelter. Sometimes he'd even convince her to take a quick break near it, hoping Hayden would give him that slim chance of seeing him walk out the front door. But he never did.

After Emma caught onto his plan a few days later, Jack decided that he should probably try something else. But nothing came to mind that wasn't creepy or taking the easy way out. Maybe he was being stupid about not wanting to ruin his own fun, but Jack was enjoying his little chase. Either way meeting Hayden again would end his little thrill, but maybe he could make it more interesting for himself by not being direct.

It was only when his little sister finally cornered him about his deal with the shelter that he realized that he should end his game and actually reach his goal. (And, no, it wasn't because Emma wouldn't stop making fun of him for "liiiiiking" the vet's son)

So that weekend Jack finally decided the direct approach was the best approach and took a walk down to the shelter alone, telling his parents he was simply going for a walk. Apparently, Val's shelter was only open until about one in the afternoon on Saturdays and was

closed all-together on Sundays, so he trekked down when it was close to closing in hopes of finally seeing Hayden.

When he entered, the first thing Jack noticed was that Stefan wasn't behind the counter like he usually was. In fact, he didn't seem to be there at all. There was only one man in the waiting area and Val was talking to him from behind the front desk. He was rather tall and plump in a more-fat-than-muscle kind of way. Shaggy blond hair bounced about as he spoke to the vet with a voice that was very... high and pitchy for a male. By his side was a bulldog on a leash, wagging its tail and looking up at its owner. It had a cone around it's head and Jack could see stitches on its underside.

"Just make sure she doesn't swallow anymore rocks and she'll be fine, Felix." Val assured him.

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Haddock." He replied "I promise, I'll keep a better eye on her from now on. Oh! And tell Hayden I said hi."

The vet giggled "Will do, dear."

With that, the large boy turned and walked out with the dog, keeping his full attention on her and doing the usual baby talk lots of people do to their pets.

As Val watched him leave, she spotted Jack "Oh, Jack." She smiled "What are you doing here today, hm?"

"Well, uh," He shifted on his feet and shrugged "I-I've been kinda beating around the bush all week now and-"

The bell over the door rang and Val's attention immediately went over to it. There was a woman half in the doorway looking at the pair nervously and fiddling with the braid her black hair was tied into "Oh, um, are you Doctor Haddock?"

"I am." Val confirmed "What can do for ya?"

"Well, um," the woman bit her lip "I have a whole bunch of stuff in my car that I'd like to, uh, donate to you and the animals. I'm sorry I came so close to closing today; the time got away from me this morning."

"It's no problem." The vet affirmed "Just let me get my son to help us bring it in." She turned around and yelled at the door leading to the back "Hayden!" she called out "Hayden!"

She kept her eyes on the door behind the counter and Jack followed suit. It only took a few seconds before he saw auburn hair flash by the door's small window. Hayden awkwardly took a few steps back and opened the door, only poking his head through outside. God, he was just as cute as Jack remembered. "What, Mom?"

"I know you're busy back there dear, but I could really use your help bringing in these donations. I'd appreciate it." Val smiled after that and looked at her son expectantly.

Hayden bit the inside of his cheek, looked at the stranger holding the door open, and huffed "Okay."

He emerged from behind the door and Jack noticed that he had something slung around his neck. It looked kind of like the things that people use to support broken arms but that couldn't be it. How would someone with one arm be helpful at lifting anything? He was about to offer to do it himself when Hayden finally got around the counter and the object around his neck became more visible. It was a ratty-looking red blanket that he'd tied in the back so that it dangled down to his stomach. And something was inside of the blanket, something that looked kind of like a little ball.

Val's expression softened at the sight but her smile didn't fade "Really?"

"What?" Her son questioned.

She just shrugged it off "Nothin'. Just come help me."

Hayden nodded and started to advance until he noticed Jack. The taller boy meekly waved at the shorter and Hayden stopped in his tracks for a moment. Then, he went outside with his mother and the woman and Jack could hear faint conversation about who's carrying what. About three trips later, he and Val had amassed a stash of blankets, food, bowls, and leashes on the front counter, with Val carrying the heavier things and Hayden settling for what remained.

The vet looked back out the doorway and waved to the donator, shouting a "Thank you!" out the door before closing it behind them "Thank you, Hayden."

"Sure." The freckled teen just smiled at her before his eyes flicked back to Jack. As Val went about putting the new supplies in their rightful places, he wandered closer to the other boy. Jack smiled as a greeting.

Hayden responded with his own and went to say something. But he was cut off by a beeping noise coming from his pocket. He pulled out his cell phone to disable the alarm and looked back at the doors the led into the hall. He gave an apologetic look "I'm sorry, I have to take care of something really quick. I'll be back in a few minutes, promise." He disappeared behind the door again, clutching the thing in the blanket as he went.

Jack awkwardly stood there for a few seconds before Val cleared her throat, claiming his attention "Wanna give me a hand while Hayden's busy?" She asked as she lifted a large bag of dog food without much difficulty.

He nodded and went over to her, grabbing two smaller bags of cat food and following her behind the doors. On the right was an unmarked door that only had an "employees only" sign on it. Val shifted the bag's weight onto her shoulder before opening the door, turning on the light, and stepping inside. Jack followed her into the small room, which had nothing inside of it but shelves of food, treats, toys, and other pet supplies.

Val threw her bag on top of some other bags of the same size "The cat food goes to the right of me, with the rest of it." Jack did as he was instructed, placing his bags with the other cat food "Thank you, dear."

"No problem." He replied. The pair went back into the front and grabbed more supplies to bring into the supply closet "So, uh, how long have you had this place open?"

"Oh, only about five years now." Val explained "I started out at another clinic, but I'm a leader, Jack. I'm no follower. So I kept at it, school and training, until I could open my own place." She looked back and grinned "Hayden's coming back." Jack turned around and saw the brunet turn the corner, but he quickly looked back the way he came and ran. He could hear a faint beeping noise, which stopped not long after her vanished from view. Val laughed at the scene "That boy. Stubborn as his father, been running himself ragged lately. Maybe you can convince him to take a little break, hm?"

"Maybe." Jack shrugged, advancing towards the brunet when he turned the corner once again.

The freckled boy flicked his eyes upward and locked them on Jack "Wh-who let you back here?"

"I was helping your mom out." The taller boy claimed.

Hayden nodded and looked down again. Jack followed his gaze down until he saw the boy had a bottle in his hand once again "Uh, you wanna goâ€¦ sit somewhere?"

"Sure."

He looked towards the waiting area and then down the hallway he came from "Come on, this way." Jack followed the smaller boy through the building and out the back door. He saw that there were two more buildings behind the clinic itself. On the left a portion of the grass between them was fenced off into rows, attached to the smaller of the two buildings. Inside some of the rows, he saw dogs wandering about and slipping in and out of holes in the building's wall, barking at one another and smelling the ground. On the right was a large barn with more fencing around the back of it. Jack could make out a horse or two, and maybe some other animals, but they were mostly blocked by the barn itself.

Hayden sat down on the edge of the porch, letting his legs dangle off the side as he situated himself. Jack came and sat next to him, watching his hands curiously. The brunet moved some of the blanket sling out of the way and saw the black kitten from a week ago inside of it, pawing at the air and making little noises "I know, buddy, I know." He soothed as he brought the tip of the bottle closer to the kitten's mouth. It took the object immediately and started sucking down its contents.

"So, he's okay?" Jack questioned.

"He should be." Hayden informed "He didn't have an easy start, but it looks like he'll be like any other cat when he's grown up."

The taller of the two fumbled for a follow-up, trying to find a decent response "That's... good."

Hayden took his eyes off of the kitten to deadpan at the other boy "That's all you have to say?"

"I kind of don't know what else to say." At that, Jack got an eye roll before they cast back down to the little ball of black fur heartily sucking down the remainder of the milk in the bottle.

The shorter boy took the bottle away from the kitten once it was finished and ran a hand down its back "Good job, bud. Keep at it like that and you'll be running around out here in a few weeks."

With Hayden's attention back on the feline, Jack had more problems figuring out what to say to keep conversation going. Between the brunet's silence and Jack shamelessly watching him smile down at the kitten, the pale boy's mind went blank. Finally, he decided to keep conversation on the object of Hayden's attention "Did you name him?"

The freckled boy nodded "Toothless."

"... Huh...?"

"Toothless." He repeated, looking back at Jack "I know it's kind of... stupid, since he'll get teeth eventually, but it was the first thing I said to him, you know, the day he was born, and... it just felt right to call him that."

And there was that smile that got Jack so interested in the boy to begin with. Hayden gave that kitten the same soft expression and warm smile that was getting harder and harder for Jack to ignore. The smaller boy's fingers gently ran down Toothless' back as the kitten changed positions and made tiny meows. All the while, the taller of the two remained silent, content taking in the scene before him. He felt himself relaxing and, when Hayden looked his way and caught him staring, a wave of heat flood up to his cheeks as he quickly looked away.

"What were you doing...?" At least he didn't sound like he was angry.

Jack sighed and swung his legs, attempting to get rid of some of his nervous energy "Nothing, just..." his legs stopped "looking at how... adorable you are." Wait, did he just say that last part out loud?

Hayden stared blankly at him for a moment, like he was trying to process exactly what Jack had said to him. When it looked like he made the connection, he rose an eyebrow "Um... thank you...?"

Crap, he did say it out loud! Well, he couldn't exactly back out now, could he? He chuckled "You know, uh... I've been trying to talk to you all week now."

"I know." The brunet explained "My parents kept talking about seeing you around."

"And, they didn't think it was... creepy or anything?"

"Not really. They thought it was a little weird... but sweet."

Jack looked back at him with wide eyes "Huh?"

"Let's just say my parents have made a game out of finding potential boyfriends for me since I came out a few years ago. They have a point system and everything." Hayden smiled at the thought and snorted a laugh "My dad basically added you to the game when he saw us talking last week. Mom caught onto the idea when she saw you passing by a lot."

Okay, now Jack was just embarrassed. Here he thought he was gonna be all smooth with this, be friends with Hayden first, get to know him a little more before actually making a move, and not play the "I'm Gay" card until he had an idea of the other's... interests. But clearly it got played for him by Hayden's parents!

The freckled boy cleared his throat to regain Jack's attention "Hey, Earth to Jack. Ya still awake?"

"Sorry, Hayden, I just... don't really know how to respond to that."

The freckled boy shrugged "I figured. But don't worry about it too much; that game the three of us play is just for fun. I mean, it's not like I walk up to each of these guys and ask for their numbers."

Jack flashed the other boy a pure white smile "So, what, is it just a 'who can find the most hot men' kind of deal?"

Hayden returned the smile with his own "Kinda, yeah. It's uh... kind of the way I got them to understand a bit more. Especially my dad; he was really confused when I told him. It's stupid and cheesy, but it kept us from drifting apart, ya know?"

The taller boy nodded "So, uh," he scooted an inch closer "did your parents get any points from me?"

The shorter smirked "I don't know... maybe a few."

"So~ what does that mean?"

"That I'd like to be friends first, if that's okay."

Jack let out a breath he didn't know he was holding in "Oh thank God, I was hoping you'd say that."

Hayden chuckled "Glad we're on the same page, then."

"Does being friends mean I can come here and bother you?"

"Only if I'm not busy."

End  
file.